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ABSTRACT

In examining the nature of literacy in ancient Athens, this paper reviews the work of key modern scholars and their positions in the debates concerning the development of literacy in Greece, the oral culture preceeding this, and the technology that enabled it to occur. Following an introduction surveying the viewpoints of Rhys Carpenter, L. H. Jeffrey, David Diringer, and Eric Havelock, among others, regarding the date the alphabet was introduced, the first section of the paper summarizes Havelock's reevaluation of Greek preliterate society in terms of mnemonics and poetry. The second section reviews F. G. Kenyon's and F. D. Harvey's arguments in dating the appearance of an extensive reading public in ancient Greece by literary and archeological evidence, and the third section reviews Kenyon's and E. G. Turner's work on the use of papyrus as book material, and summarizes Havelock's arguments that date widespread literacy back to 405 B.C., the year of the first production of Aristophanes' "Frogs." (CRH)

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Literacy in Ancient Greece:

THE EVIDENCE FROM HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

by

Karyn Hollis

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What was the nature of literacy in ancient Athens? Who wrote what, for what purpose, and where? What was the nature of the written medium? These questions have stirred up much controversy among scholars, and the answers themselves have often reflected the linguistic and cultural prejudices of the times. Almost in spite of itself, Greek scholorship has pushed the date of widespread Greek literacy from the 14th century B.C. all the way up to the early 5th century B.C. This in turn has led to the investigation of a previously neglected and little respected area--Greek pre-literacy--and to the complete reevaluation of its significance for later Greek and Western cultural acheivements.

This paper will examine the representative scholars and their debate around the development of literacy in Greece, the oral cultural which preceded this development, and the technological means which enabled it to occur.

It was previously assumed that the dazzling Athenian civilization which flourished in the 4th and 5th centuries B.C. was necessarily the product of a long heritage of written, documented culture. It was thus reasoned that the alphabet had to have been introduced into Greece as early as the 14th century B.C. Its use was supposed to have become increasingly widespread and to have culminated in an almost totally literate society as early as the 7th century B.C. This view, which largely discounts the potential and achievements of oral cultures, has been increasingly under attack as evidence from various disciplines mounts convincingly to disprove it.

Rhys Carpenter was the first to publish in the face of established opinion in 1933 when he argued that historical and epigraphical evidence pointed to a date for the introduction of the alphabet into Greece of

between 720 and 700 B.C. (1933). More recently, L.H. Jeffery, in her often cited work, The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece, strongly supports Carpenter's conclusion for a late introduction, offering the following arguments among others: 1). The alphabet was acquired from Phoenicians as Greeks began to settle in North Semetic territory. There were no such lasting settlements until the 8th century. 2). No inscriptions have been found which can be dated much beyond the 8th century. (1961:10).

Other recent scholars have hovered about this later date within a century or two. Gelb writes that the 9th century is the most probable time of borrowing of the Semetic writing by the Greeks (1962:181). And in the latest major work on the subject, David Diringer pushes the date back to 1000 B.C. because of recent evidence dating the Etruscan alphabet (which descended from the Greek) at around the 8th or 9th century--thereby placing the Greek at least a century earlier (1968:359). The debate, therefore, has been narrowed to a period of two centuries instead of the previous seven.

This change in perspective has lead scholars to reexamine the period preceding Greek literacy to provide a reevaluation of Greek pre-literate society which offers a plausible foundation for the cultural splendor that was to follow. Eric Havelock has been foremost among them.

Pre-literate Greece

First of all, Havelock documents his claim that all the essential features of the Greek city state were in place by the 10th century. "In the face of these facts," he writes, "a conception which identifies cultural sophistication with a degree of literacy must be discarded" (1973:347)

Havelock then explains how cultural storage takes place in a non-literate culture. Language itself, as Whorf has postulated, incorporates a myriad of attitudes, perspectives and beliefs that an individual uncon-

scously acquires when he or she acquires language. For example, the words "polygamy" and "promiscuity" are "dirty words" in our monogamous culture. Not many people have to be told this information explicitly; it is conveyed through tone and context. A non-literate culture, then, could maintain a basic belief system simply by maintaining the stability of its vocabulary and syntax (1973:356).

The next question Havelock attempts to answer is just how a non-literate culture can accumulate or document sophisticated information in the areas of literature, philosophy, theology, law and science There is only one way to do this, he maintains, "by the arranging of words in a rhythmic sequence which is independent of the words, but to which they have to respond acoustically." In short, one must memorize poetry. The mnemonic rhythm of poetry is found at the acoustic level by assonance, alliteration, etc., and at the thematic level by parallelism, antitheses, and chiasmus, etc. (1973:358).

Havelock then argues that oral poetry was essentially didactic entertainment, a cultural memory of sorts which transmitted information vital to the continuation of Greek civilization. Thus, Homer becomes the quintessential teacher, and the epic a storage place for technological information (1973:369). The first book of the Iliad, for example, provides "a complete and formulaic report on the loading, embarking, disembarking and unloading of sailing vessels" (1963:34). Havelock offers this thesis in Preface to Plato as a way of explaining why Plato was hostile to poets. In attempting to formulate a new human perspective--based, for all his denials, on the written word --Plato dislodges the revered position afforded the classical poets. According to Havelock, Plato felt that Homer enticed his contemporaries into a dangeriously

mesmerizing cultural totality produced by a total, physical emersion in the oral recitation process. Termed "mousike," the oral education system called for dance and song as aids to memory. The individual was swept away by an engulfing experience. "Plato had to destroy this immemorial habit of self-identification with the oral tradition" (1963:201). Havelock has concluded that

> the tension thus built up between oral and written proved fruitful in helping to release those post-Homeric energies, mysteriously creative, which remain the secret of Greece in the archaic and high classical epochs (1963:363).

A look at those "post-Homeric energies" in the realm of literacy will follow.

Greek Literacy

The Use of Books in Ancient Greece by F.G. Kenyon is an attempt to date the appearance of an extensive reading public in ancient Greece. Kenyon progressively documents the gradual development of this public, but much of his evidence is scanty and the conclusions he comes to often lack credibility. He maintains that both the Iliad and Odyssey were written compositions. Exemplifying the biases of a literate culture, Kenyon writes that "It is difficult to conceive how poems of such a scale could have been produced without the assistance of written copies" (1951:12). Nevertheless, Kenyon claims that there is absolutely no evidence to indicate the existence of an extensive reading public cotemporaneous to Homer. He attaches little importance to the fact that writing poetry is nowhere mentioned in Homer while reciting poetry certainly is . He specualtes that rhapsodes had access to scarce, written copies of the epic poems and that they memorized the very long works from these copies (1951:15).

With the beginning of the 7th century and the lyric age of Greek poetry, Kenyon sees the circulation of literature passing from the rhapsodes to manuscripts. He speculates that while recitations of Homeric poems and setting

poems to music were still featured at Hellenic festivals, the more personal compositions, such as the satires of Archilocus, the political verses of Sappho and Alcacus, were unfit for musical accompaniment and had to have been circulated as manuscripts. He reminds us that the poets were familiar with each other's work and enjoyed reputations among the population and concludes again that their work must have been written down. Nevertheless, "we have no evidence to give precision to our picture of the methods of publication" (1951:19). He continues that an organized book trading network could hardly have existed at the time, but yet sufficient quantities of these poet's works must have existed to secure their continued preservation and to make it possible for them to be gathered into libraries when they were established (1951:19).

Characterizing the 5th century as the cluminating point of Greek culture, with the work of Pindar, Simonides and Aeschylus beginning the period and that of Euripedes, Herodotus, Thucydides and Aristophanes closing it, Kenyon seems puzzled by the "very limited book production" which corresponded to this period of intense literary creativeness (1951:20). Substantiating Havelock's arguments for the power of oral culture, Kenyon writes that even at this point oral modes still predominate, but that performers must have had copies of works from which to learn them. "What is to some extent doubtful is the circulation of copies of books among the general public, and the growth of the habit of reading" (1951:21). Therefore, Kenyon sees no widespread literacy at this point.

References to the reading of books are rare during Greece's Golden Age. Kenyon points out that Socrates refers to a volume of Anaxagoras in Plato's Phaedo and the Apology. He boasts that one drachma will buy anyone a copy of Anaxagoras. In the Phaedrus, of course, Kenyon points out that Socrates disparages dependency on books rather than memory. In a work by Xenophon, Socrates speaks reverently of the treasures of wisdom contained in the

books written by ancient sages. Kenyon believes that this reference proves that the practice of consulting books in a library was a fairly accepted one. "But it must be admitted that the general picture which we have, both in Plato and Xenophone, is of oral instruction and conversation, not of reading and private study" (1951:22). (Yet again echoing Havelock.)

Again Kenyon qualifies his evidence:

> It would be a mistake, however, to overstress this scantiness of evidence as an argument against the existence and even the abundant existence and free use of books in the latter part of the 5th Century (1 51:22).

According to Kenyon, the very casualness of the above literary references indicate that it was not considered to be an unusual action (1951:22).

As to libraries in this period, Kenyon admits that there is practically no evidence. Athenaeus mentions a traditional library established by Pisistratus and Polyerates of Samos in the sixth century, but Kenyon says these"may be mythical" (1951:24). Any libraries of this period, he writes, would have been small private ones like that of Euthydemus, amounting to at most a few scrolls (1951:23).

Thus, Kenyon seems to reach the conclusion he wants to in spite of his evidence. "The general conclusion,"he boldly proclaims, "would therefore seem to be that at the end of the fifth century and in the early part of the fourth, books existed in Athens in considerable quantity,were cheap and easily accessible" (1951:24).

Puzzlingly however, he still must grudgingly admit that ". . . While books must have been produced in considerable numbers, a reading public could hardly be said to exist" (1951:25). He continues that not until the time of Aristotle was a period of a large reading public reached.

Articles on the nature of Greek literacy are few. One of the often cited is "Literacy in the Athenian Democracy." In it, F.D. Harvey also concludes that literacy was widespread in 4th and 5th century Athens (1966:628). To validate his claims, he reviews the evidence from epigraphy and scholarship over a wide range of Athenian activities. The material he presents, however, is of mixed value for proving his thesis. Some does lend appropriate empirical weight to his arguments, while other material seems to undermine the very same evidence.

Harvey begins with what he terms the most obvious piece of evidence--the institution of ostracism. It has been offered as proof of widespread literacy at its introduction in the beginning of the 5th century. After all, citizens were required to write the name of the desired exilé on potsherds as ballots. However, Harvey points out that a man could always get someone else to write a name for him and the procedures were sometimes rigged, it seems. (Over 190 potsherds containing the name "Themistocles" were found in excavations in 1934. After analysis, it was determined that all 190 names were written by 14 people--an indication that an illiterate citizen could be duped into accepting a name which was not the one he intended.) Harvey makes no claims at this point, but goes on to examine evidence from the law courts (1966:590-93).

Written documents were required in the Athenian courts from the early 4th century. Before this date, the magistrate or his secretary wrote down oral complaints. Witnesses, after the date of 378, were also required to submit evidence in writing, but again, nothing forbids a person from hiring a scribe or submitting to a secretary. Nevertheless, Harvey maintains that this, combined with quotations from Socrates'

Demosthenic speech referring to literate jurists constitutes some evidence for widespread knowledge of how to read and write (1966:593-597).

Concerning the magistrates' secretaries, Harvey points out that they were chosen by lot, but presently there is no way of knowing whether the lot covered citizens at large or only those who applied. Thus, no light is shed on the literacy question.(1966:597).

As Harvey continues his investigation into Greek inscriptions and public notices, he finds stronger evidence in support of a literate population. Notices of new laws and changes in laws appeared from the 5th century in Athens, accompanied by the words "so that anyone who wishes may read" and "that all may know that. . ." Harvey argues that the former declaration would be a farce unless in fact most Athenians could read (1966:600). Harvey also cites many types of public notices that were frequent in Athens: meetings of the assembly, the council agenda, trial dates, and draft notices. Furthermore, many of these inscriptions (tribute lists, for example) were quite long and carving them in stone was a tedious process. Harvey feels it unlikely that such massive monuments would have been created for the edification of a small literate minority (1966:601).

Next Harvey cites the famous lines in Aristophanes' comedy, Frogs, as further evidence of a large literate public: "Everyone has got a book and can understand all the clever points" (1966:601). Harvey cautions, however, that we cannot tell exactly what Aristophanes meant by this phrase--perhaps he was only flattering his audience. A more convincing piece of evidence occurs in Theseus of Euripides. Here we encounter an illiterate sailor who describes letters he sees on another ship to a man who can read. Harvey predicts that the scene would have

failed had the audience been illiterate too and unable to read the letters along with the literate character (1966:603).

Looking at inscriptions and paintings on vases, Harvey offers some further relevant information. Vases are found with names on them, greetings and dedications. This proves, writes Harvey, that even humble vase painters were literate. Harvey explains that the numerous indecipherable inscriptions are mere decoration like those in paintings of Picasso (1966:605).

In his next category, business and trade, Harvey has found the opinions of scholars to be divided on the issue. He cites Hasebroek who believed that most merchants were illiterate. As evidence of this Hasebroek says that in law courts men called witnesses rather than produce documents. Harvey counters this charge with an explanation based on Greek caligraphy. The Greeks had not yet developed a cursive script, and as a result, had no modern way of signing a signature. It was thus very easy to forge someone's name on a document--hence their preference for witnesses. Hasebroek also maintains that Greeks did not use receipts, but Harvey writes that this tells us nothing about literacy as the Greeks had other customs which served the same purpose. Harvey speculates that businessmen must have kept accounts, but that there is little evidence to go on; the same is true for inventories (1966:606-13).

In private life Harvey once again finds it impossible to say how much use the average Athenian made of writing. It seems probable from a reference of Euripides' that letter writing was not considered to be anything out of the ordinary. Wills were commonly found, but they offer no proof of literacy since they could be dictated, and also only wealthy citizens were likely to require them (1966:616).

As for women and slaves, Harvey concludes that neither group was likely to be very literate although numerous authors advised that women be learned enough in their letters to supervise a household. There was not much incentive for them to go beyond that since they had no political rights. The women pictured on vases, etc., are intended in the majority to depict muses or poetesses. The women who rose above the general level of literacy were, of course, rare exceptions. The case with slaves is unclear. Harvey tells us that there were instances of a few personal slaves who could read and write; some were even required to keep public records,and then there were those who were apparently taught to read and write by benevolent masters. It seems unlikely that literacy would be widespread among them, however, for they were even more disenfranchised than women (1966:621-23).

Incidentally, he cites fictional characters and plays which indicate that just as one might expect, there were more illiterates in the country than the city.

Remarkably enough, after this series of largely inconclusive investigations, Harvey like Kenyon, affirms "We have seen then, that literacy was widespread" (1966:619). He does qualify that "Much of this is conjecture and deduction; but all . . . point in the same direction . . . The great majority of Athenian citizens were literate" (1966:628).

Interestingly, Harvey maintains that an increase in public schools coincides with the early years of Athenian democracy and concludes that the idea of a school was in invention of the young Athenian government (1966:630).

The exhaustive study of ancient education written by H.I. Marrou confirms Harvey's remarks on schooling. He writes, "des l'epoque des guerres médiques, on peut tenir pour certain l'existence d'un enseignement des lettres" (1965:83). Nevertheless, Marrou confesses that dating the

appearance of reading and writing in the schools is difficult. He finally also settles for the end of the 4th century (1965:83).

Literary Technology of Ancient Greece

A look at the material conditions of literacy technology prevailing at the time of Ancient Greece provide some valuable insights.

It is somewhat surprising as E.G. Turner reminds us, that for the Ancient Greek readers and writers, a book was a roll of papyrus. It was inconvenient and impermanent. Two hands were required to get at its contents, hold it open, wind and rewind it (1968:7). Yet it presented an improvement over stone, metal or wood that had been used previously. Turner dates the arrival of papyrus into Greece from Egypt at around the middle of the 7th century B.C. (Interestingly, this corresponds with Carpenter's date for the introduction of the alphabet). Had papyrus been in use in Greece during the earlier Mycenean Age, one would have to explain how and why it totally disappeared for three centuries (1968:2).

Papyrus itself was manufactured out of the pith of a water plant. The supply of papyrus appears to have been a strictly controlled monopoly operated by the government of Egypt and contracted out to individual suppliers (1968:48). The papyrus was sold by the sheet. These sheets were made by extracting the pith of the plant, cutting it into strips and arranging one layer of the strips in a horizontal fashion and one vertically. Pressure was then exerted on the strips which had been moistened and glued until they formed a single fabric.

In his book, F.G. Kenyon maintains that papyrus sheets were as strong as good paper. The size of the sheets in which the material was manufactured depended on the size the strips could be cut without including weakened

segments. Although there are sheets preserved up to 15 inches wide, 9 inches was a common width of the best papyrus while inferior varieties might measure only 5 or 6 inches. Length averaged between 10 and 13 inches. It is estimated that the average size of a papyrus sheet intended for a Greek work of literature was 10" X 7½"(1951:51).

The papyrus sheets, however, were not sold individually. They were glued together, side by side to form a continuous roll--sometimes as many as 20 sheets to the roll. If an author wished to continue his work past 20 sheets he could glue on a second roll to the first. If his work was shorter than the length purchased, he had only to cut off the extra material. While Egyptian rolls sometimes exceeded 100 feet in length, 35 feet appears to be the longest of any Greek literary rolls (1951:54).

Once the rolls were purchased, scribes or authors began to write on them in column fashion. Since the roll was made up before it was written on, the columns did not correspond regularly to the sheets. Junctures often appeared in the middle of columns and caused tears. In the case of poetry, the width of the column depended on the length of the line. It is estimated that between 2" to 3½" is the average width for a column of writing (1951:56).

The number of lines in a column and the number of letters in a line of prose vary with the size of the scribe's handwriting. Usually the number of lines per column will remain approximately the same throughout the roll. The number of letters in a line, however, may vary considerably. Scribes do not seem to have been concerned with containing their columns in rectangular shapes as were their medieval counterparts. The right-hand edge of the column was allowed to be ragged and irregular. An

average column contained 25 to 45 lines and there were about 18 to 25 letters to a line (1951:59).

Margins varied with the concern of the scribe for the beauty of the book--wider margins are usually associated with finer productions. In the large Hyperides manuscript, for example, the upper margin is 2½ inches, the lower is 3 inches with 3/4 of an inch between columns. At the beginning of a roll, space equivalent to a column width was left blank, perhaps giving the reader something to hold the roll by when reading. Titles, when they appear at all, are found at the end of a work (1951:61).

The writing on a papyrus roll was normally on one side only--that side being the one on which the papyrus fibres ran horizontally (1951:63).

Among the consequences of the limited size of papyrus rolls was the fact that no work of any considerable length could be contained on a single roll. Two or three books or the Iliad, for example, were as much as any ordinary roll could contain. Another consequence was that collected editions of an authors work could not exist--the papyrus roll not being long enough. Therefore, the fame of one work would not automatically extend to other works of an author. This also explains why some seven plays of Aeschylus survived while the rest perished (1951:65).

It appears that in Greek times large libraries were rare and that small ones, consisting of the number of rolls contained in a large cupborad or small room were uncommon until the Alexandrian period (1951:67).

In addition to their cumbersome nature, there were other hindrances to reading involved with papyrus rolls. The separation of words was practically non-existant and punctuation was skimpy, almost never systematic. In dramatic texts, a short stroke below the first letters in a

line indicates a change in speaker, but the name of the speaker is hardly ever given. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the reader was expected to be able to understand his text without any of the aids to which we are accustomed. This probably indicates a previous oral familiarity, providing further support for Havelock's main contentions.

As there were no numbered pages or lines, it was also very difficult to find a given passage and impossible to give a reference to its location. Further inconviences to readers result from the individualized style of each scribe. Differences in handwriting were often quite great.

Thus, the evidence based on an examination of the technical aspects of the written communication process does not appear conducive to the idea of a large reading public in ancient Greece. The "books" that Kenyon wrote of were these cumbersome papyrus rolls. Their inconvenient nature seems to preclude widespread literacy of the kind we know today.

In his latest published material on the subject, which takes all the above material into account, Eric Havelock offers a cogent explanation of this tendency to exagerate the literate abilities of the Greeks on the part of western scholars as well as offering many novel insights into the particular circumstances that contributed to the unique qualities of the unparalleled Greek achievement (1977). His conclusions seem all the more convincing after this examination of both literacy scholarship and technical apparatus.

Havelock begins his article by asserting emphatically that "the population of Athens did not become literate in our sense until the last third of the 5th century before Christ (1977:369). He reiterates his earlier position that the classical culture of Greece was a dazzling but preliterate one which included such monumental achievements as the polis, geometric art, early

temple architecture and the Homeric hexameter (1977:370).

Greek progress toward literacy begins with what Havelock terms "craft literacy" which lasted from the 7th until the last decades of the 6th centuries B.C. During this time, only a small proportion of the society could read and write, and this segment of the population was not necessarily the upper class as our modern conceptions would lead us to believe. Rather, the artisans and craftsmen were among the first to learn the new skill. Thus, Harvey's contention that literacy was widespread because even "humble craftsmen" had learned the skill may not be as plausible as it sounds at first blush.

The education of the Greek upper classes was oral. The curriculum was identified with the term "mousike" and consisted in the memorization of poetry, the improvisation of verse, the oral delivery of a prose rhetoric based on verse principles, singing and dancing. Havelock maintains that for a long time after the invention of the alphabet, letters were not included in the educational curriculum (1977:371).

The next stage in the Greek acquisition of literacy Havelock terms "recitation literacy." This period extends from the latter part of the sixth century through to the first half of the fifth. During this time, the skill begins to spread, but it is one of decipherment rather than fluent reading. Reading itself is used as a mnemonic device to aid in the memorization of the poets (1977:372).

"Only in the last third of the 5th century is the average Athenian taught letters in such a way as to begin to pick up a script and read it through," maintains Havelock (1977:373). Before this date Havelock points out that there was not a sufficient body of written documentation to provide the motivation necessary for learning to read. As we have

seen, the description of the production of papyrus rolls adds convincing evidence to Havelock's thesis. Papyrus rolls did not exist in sufficient quantity to be available in private houses and easily transmissible between readers before about 450 B.C.

Finally, Havelock insists that to become truly fluent in letters, one needs to have been drilled in their use since childhood. There is no substitute for the schooled instruction which renders a skill automatic. What little that is known of schools in the 6th and 5th century in Athens does not lead one to believe that any sort of literacy exercises were part of the curriculum. Evidence presented by Marrou above indicates that these activities didn't become commonplace until the end of the 4th century.

Finally, Havelock quotes from Aristophanes' Frogs produced in 405 B.C. One of the characters speaks of "reading the Andromeda to myself" (1977:388). Havelock claims that this is the first known explicit allusion to the private act of reading--one in which the reader has divorced him or herself from the audience situation. They become a reader in the modern sense (1977:389).

At the same time as the first reader was depicted in Athenian literature, another was being represented in sculpture for the first time. The subject is portrayed sitting, absorbed in reading with a papyrus roll in his lap (1977:389).

Havelock,who has pushed the date of widespread literacy all the way back to 405 B.C., concludes:

> So as Athens enters upon the fourth century, her literate revolution, so much more significant for further history than all her political comings and

> goings, was being accomplished, with certain fateful consequences for Europe and the world (1977:399).

It is this literate revolution that is just beginning to be appreciated for its relevance to contemporary language study.

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